ACT UP
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Interviewee: **Richard Deagle**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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Interview of Richard Deagle
September 14, 2003

SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could say your name, how old you are, today's date, where you live and where we are?

RICHARD DEAGLE: How old I am? Oh, you want to frighten people. I'm Richard Deagle. I live in Jersey City. I was 50 last Christmas, which means that I've been in ACT UP for a third of my life – something like that. That's sort of amazing. What else do you need to know? I'm sorry.

SS: What's today's date, and where are we?

RD: Oh, we're in James Wentzy's beautiful subterranean loft in lower Manhattan and it's September 14, 2003.

SS: Okay, well, just to find out a little bit about you – I've always wanted to ask you, what's the history of your family name?

RD: Got me. When we lived in Germany, when I was a kid – my dad was in the army – we got these swanky coat of arms things that I think has zero to do with the family, really. I think it has more to do with commerce. But it's English, as far as I know. I think it's probably one of those Norman names that was originally French or something, but genealogy is not something I'm particularly interested in.

SS: Did you have that classic army brat upbringing?

RD: Oh yeah – went to a different school every year and a half. Who's the geeky kid that we can beat up?

SS: That's the way it was?

RD: Well, I'm pretty transparent with how I feel about stuff, and not really good at hiding it. And, if you're the kid that things annoy, they will tend to try to annoy

you, so, yeah, I get punched.

SS: So, how did your family respond to you being scapegoated?

RD: Well, there's always been an amount of eccentricity in the family. I'm certainly not the only eccentric, but I think I was the odd one because I didn't want to play baseball. I mean, you know, I ended up finding out later on that my mother had paid some guy to have me on the Little League team, and I was much more interested in something else. So, I think I lasted about 10 minutes on that.

SS: And when did you come out to yourself? Was that simultaneous to escaping from Little League?

RD: Oh no, that was much later. By the time I was in high school and college, and stuff like that – it was the '70s, and everybody thought they were bisexual. And, finally, I figured out well I'd much rather be with guys because the type that got me working had very little to do with girls, although I have a lot of women friends. But that's a little different from attraction.

SS: So, if you started seeing yourself as a gay man or a bisexual man in high school and college, when did you start getting interested in politics? Were those two things related for you?

RD: Oh, not at all. I was just a little too late for the '60s radical stuff. I graduated from high school in 1970, and that stuff was pretty much winding down by then. The politics didn't really happen until I got involved with ACT UP.

SS: So, you had 15 years of homosexuality without –

RD: Without?

SS: Without deciding to make an overt commitment to a political organization.

RD: I wasn't particularly interested in politics. And, I must say that in a way, the stridency of ACT UP worked very well with a certain stridency that started coming out in me, because I had always been – I think the expression is: "Wouldn't say shit, if he had a mouthful." I was always very quiet, and I wasn't the one to cause any trouble. And then, there are a lot of things that just really annoy me, and it's much easier for me to blow up and get it over with, than to suffer in silence and have my ulcer on my own time.

SS: Let's talk about those 15 years between coming out and coming to ACT UP, before we get into the ACT UP experience.

RD: Sure.

SS: Where were you living? What were you doing for a living?

RD: I lived in Norfolk, Virginia, and I got a job while I was in college in a darkroom and worked there for years. I work at night, which was great, because it kept
00:05:00 me away from idiot things like television for awhile. And part of the time was really grinding manual labor for no money. And then – being in the darkroom is sort of interesting because everything comes down to what you can feel with your fingers. It's actually interesting, if you do it for long enough, even though there's this huge pile of paper trash on the floor, if you drop something, by hearing it, you can figure out where it is, pretty close, because you don't dare want to turn the light on and ruin everything to go search for something. That's only the last resort. But part of that was, I would run a

machine to do the black and white film. There was very little black and white being done in the '70s, and so I had this cantankerous machine that invariably would screw up and all the film would come out looking like fried bacon. But I think maybe you want to know more about my friends and stuff.

SS: Just to know who you were, before you entered into that group relationship.

RD: Well, most of my friends from Virginia are straight friends. I didn't really, per se, hang with a gay crowd. But, it was a really interesting group of straight friends, in that the bar that we would all go to on Wednesday nights – because that way, you could have party and no one would have to clean up afterwards – we'd all go this bar on Wednesday nights, and they had a pool table, and they had music, and sometimes live music. But then, when they put the pool table in, it kind of made it awkward, because you'd be sitting there, talking about something and being real self-important, and someone would shove a cue in your ear. So, one of our number, who was gay, found out that the local gay disco was quiet on Wednesday nights and so, for a couple of years, we went there. All these people that – I think some of the straight men were actually very intimidated by going to the Cue – the name of the bar was the Cue – but the folks at the Cue were quite pleasant to us, and they'd give us free drinks sometimes. Then, after a couple of years, they decided to do disco on Wednesday nights, and so, we went off and found another bar.

SS: So, you had a community of people where you felt really comfortable as a gay man.

RD: Well, yeah. Within that group of people, there were a couple of people who made remarks, but generally – my best friend, Phyllis, who's dead now, unfortunately, was sort of the queen bee of the group, and if somebody said anything to me, she'd get them. So, that was kind of nice.

SS: So, what made you decide to leave Norfolk?

RD: Well, there was this really bad attempted affair that kind of blew up, and my parents got a divorce, and my mother could pass for Godzilla with no problem. And I figured if I stayed in Norfolk, then I was going to be in that, and I wanted to go to graduate school. And for years, I'd wanted to be in New York. From around the time of high school on, I'd been getting the Village Voice, so, I knew what was hip and happening and groovy in New York. And, when I would get vacation time, I would come to New York, and it just always seemed like – well, depending on your point of view – either the navel or the armpit of the universe. I mean, it seemed like where I wanted to be.

SS: Did you apply to graduate school?

RD: Yeah, I went to Pratt.

SS: And what did you study there?

RD: I went to Pratt for communications design – i.e., graphic design. I went to school in Virginia and got a Fine Art degree, which qualifies you to do absolutely nothing useful. I was a print maker, and the difference between prints and a poster is, one has writing on it. I figured, maybe I could make a living doing that. Well, surprise. But, Pratt was a real disappointment, because I think they'd have taken trained apes, if they

had the tuition money. It was not anything like I was expecting it to be. It was sort of laughable – parts of it. But I did learn some stuff and moved to New York – thought I was going to live the loft lifestyle that you see in *New York Magazine* or whatever, and, of course, I ended up in Jersey City because everything in Manhattan was far, far, too expensive.

SS: And what year was that?

RD: That was the fall of '80. Some of the folks that I'd been staying with had
00:10:00 a loft near Macy's and they moved in with us in Jersey City. We had three floors of a brownstone for an incredibly cheap amount. And they stayed until they could get a new place in Manhattan. And it was kind of interesting, because the night of the Reagan election, which was November of '80, our power went out and it was snowing. And, it just seemed perfect, to go with the Reagan years. We were in the cold, with no lights.

SS: In New Jersey.

RD: In New Jersey. Yeah, add insult to injury.

SS: So, when did you first hear the word AIDS?

RD: I think, like a lot of people from New York in that period, probably from the *Native* – although, the *New York Native* was such a tabloid kind of thing. It began to feel like the *National Enquirer* – "aliens ate my brain" kind of stuff. And there was this buzz going on. We knew something was happening, but the legitimate press was completely ignoring it, so you had fringe press, like the *New York Native*, writing about it. Something was up, but nobody knew quite what.

SS: And what was the first time you encountered somebody who actually

had AIDS?

RD: I went with a friend to the GMHC rodeo, and one of my friend's friends was involved with GMHC. In fact, I think he even had a title there. And we met up and met some people before we met. And there was this really nice-looking guy, and he was talking about medications and stuff. I was like, oh my god – this really hot guy, and he's sick. I can't remember Raymond's last name. My friend Jacques's friend, Raymond [Jacobs], worked at GMHC, and Raymond and his boyfriend, Peter, both died – both got sick and both died. Those were the first people I met.

SS: Did you feel personally threatened at that time?

RD: I didn't feel threatened because there wasn't any kind of intimate contact going on, but I was just sort of going – oh my god, these really hot people – and they're practically dead. I mean, they didn't have any kind of wasting or anything. They hadn't gotten that far along in their illness, but I was just sort of amazed that I'd been hearing all this stuff, and here I finally meet some people that are involved in it – that have it.

SS: So, how did you decide to get involved?

RD: Well – what was the year ACT UP started? '87? So, during '87, there was this constant buzz that was building. I went to the Gay Pride parade, and I saw the concentration camp float. It wasn't real clear what the message was from the float. I don't think they had signage. You knew something was going on, and you knew there was somebody with a Reagan mask, and you saw people with gloves and bloody hands and that kind of stuff, but the message for me wasn't real clear what that was about. But you started seeing "Silence = Death" stuff, and there was this buzz, and in the gay press

there was this buzz. And, finally, I guess it must have been December or January of '88, I decided to go see what it was all about. And I went to a meeting at the Center, and it was an unusual meeting, because it was upstairs, on the top floor, and I didn't know anybody, and all of these people seemed to know each other or what was going on. ACT UP can be a really daunting thing, for a first timer. And there was this huge floor fight. I'm trying to remember the woman's name and I'm blanking on it. It came up that the Coordinating Committee wanted to be able to approve money up to a certain amount, and not go to the Coordinating Committee for things.

SS: The Coordinating Committee wanted to do things without going to the floor?

RD: No, the floor wanted to, for specific actions, be able to approve up to – I think it was 200 bucks – without going to the Coordinating Committee, I think is the way it worked. And there was this huge fight and it's like, no, you shouldn't be spending money, and if you approve this, I'm never coming back. It was one of these typical ACT
00:15:00 UP histrionic things. And, of course, she was back within a month.

SS: Who was it, you have to remember?

RD: I'm blanking. Oh God, I will remember this after the camera stops rolling. What was her name? Anyhow, I thought, what the heck is this? So, I said, well, you know, one time isn't going to tell you anything, and I wasn't completely turned off by this hive of activity. There were people that would show up and spend 15 minutes and go, oh my God, I can't deal with this, and never come back again. And then, there were other people – this being, sort of the beginning of the Golden Age, if you will – who

would show up and say, well, I don't know what they're talking about, but there are a lot of pretty boys there, maybe I can get some action. So, they would hang around, until they snagged a boyfriend, or decided that they weren't going to. I never got any action out of ACT UP. I did get a boyfriend that I met at the AIDS conference in Montreal, but you'd hear these amazing stories like, certain people who I will not name, counting up how many people. And there was this competition between certain people about – oh, I got this many guys from ACT UP. Well, fine, I didn't.

SS: What kind of guy would do really well in ACT UP – would be able to attract a lot of men in ACT UP.

RD: There were this group of guys that were referred to as the Swim Team, that seemed to be on everyone's date list. Not my type.

SS: Who was on the Swim Team?

RD: I don't remember. Ask Peter Staley, he'll tell you about that. Peter will know that one, if you haven't interviewed him already.

SS: I'll save that.

RD: Ask Peter about the Swim Team.

SS: So, you came there and you saw that people knew each other and that people were yelling and screaming at each other and you decided to stay.

RD: Yeah, sick guy aren't I?

SS: What did you want out of it? What was your expectation?

RD: I didn't know. I had no expectation, or I don't remember my expectation. I wanted to be involved in something and, I don't know, it just felt like the right place to

be.

SS: Had you ever had a gay community before?

RD: No. I'd had gay friends, and I'd had a small circle of friends, but not anything – in a manner of speaking, ACT UP was not my gay community, in that I wasn't dating anybody in ACT UP. But ACT UP was a different kind of circle of friends.

SS: How would you characterize it?

RD: There was a time, when I was involved with Wave III, and even after that, that I've said, I'll trust these people with my life. They say do it, I'll do it. I might give them some lip about it, but if we're gonna to it, we're gonna to do it. And, I had complete trust, which is a really rare thing.

SS: Well, maybe you can tell us the complete history of Wave III, and we can see how that relationship developed.

RD: Okay. Well, I got involved a few months before the first anniversary action and they would throw those in April, I believe?

JIM HUBBARD: March.

RD: So, I figured I started in December or January of 1988. And I also got involved with Gran Fury for awhile, at about the same time. And, for the anniversary action – I'll get to the Gran Fury part in a minute – but, for the second Wall Street action, we divided up into groups. Rather than everybody sit down at once and get arrested at once, the idea was to have a group of people sit down and get arrested. And then, when they were through, another group run out in the street and them sit down and block the

buses and whatever. So, Wave III was a group of people who went out and got together and sat down in the street. Kayton Kurowski, whose name I've mentioned earlier, was largely responsible for keeping Wave III together. He was a support person. So, he had all the names.

SS: How did you all –

RD: Just a second. So, he had all the names of this group that we're going to go out into the street together, and he and I were talking and I said, well, you know,
00:20:00 they've got people out in the street here and they've scooped them up. This is on Broadway, in front of Trinity Church. I said, why don't we take our group down here to – whatever the next parallel street was, in back of Trinity Church [Trinity Place] – block traffic there, and give them even more trouble? And we did. So, the cops were incredibly mad at us, because we had blocked off yet another street that they thought they had traffic moving on. And, we sat catty-corner across the intersection, in back of Trinity Church, for 45 minutes to an hour, before they figured out what they were doing. Then, I was annoyed, because I had gotten shoved by a cop when I first got there, who was being a real dick. And, that sort of goes with the job description. So, I figured, cause as much trouble as possible.

SS: But how did that group of people get signed up for that original –

RD: By random. They had a list of names, and you're going to go here, and you're going to go here, and you're going to go here.

SS: So, there was no relationship?

RD: There was no relationship. And, in fact, some of the Gran Fury people

were in that. But Kayton, because he had the list, called all these people and said, why don't we stay together as a group? I'm not sure when he joined, but I think he started around October, November. So, he had been there a little longer than me. And he wasn't really the arrest kind of type. He's a little older and a psychiatrist, and his demeanor was not – he wasn't the person to sit down in the street. He was the person to sort of stand around and take names and organize things. He was very good at that. So, he had the list of names, and he called everybody up and said, why don't we meet at somebody's house and have dinner? Everybody bring food or something and try to keep this together as an affinity group. And it stayed together as an affinity group until, well, for two or three years. We ended up, sort of falling apart, after one of our members Brian Damage died, and sort of, our last big project was to make sure Brian had his cigarettes and had his lunch, that the therapist had been there and to massage his feet. My role in all of that was that he would yell at me. He'd be nice to everybody else, but he'd yell at me. I guess he figured that I could take it. But it was kind of weird, because he'd save all of his rage up to let loose on me.

SS: Why?

RD: I think he thought I could take it.

SS: Let me ask you about the beginning of Wave III.

RD: Sure.

SS: Had you ever been arrested before?

RD: Never.

SS: Okay.

RD: Well, not for anything like that.

SS: Oh, okay.

RD: There was a little weirdness, when I was in college, and I spent the night in jail, but I wasn't technically arrested.

SS: And, what made you decide that you wanted to be arrested?

RD: It felt like the right thing.

SS: And how many people were arrested that day – do you know?

RD: A couple of hundred. I think it was about three buses full. So, that's 150 to 200 – somewhere like that.

SS: So, did you go through civil disobedience training, to prepare for it?

RD: Yeah, there had been a civil disobedience training.

SS: Do you remember who trained you?

RD: I think Gregg Bordowitz was one of the people, but I might be wrong on that. I know that later on, Mike Frisch and Amy Bauer were two people that were sort of the civil disobedience training people of record.

SS: So, you guys just sat in the street until the police finally figured out what they wanted to do and then you followed what you'd been trained to do in civil disobedience?

RD: Yeah. I went completely limp and they had to carry me onto the bus. And Officer Wagner – I don't remember the badge number – dropped me in the middle of the aisle on the bus and punched me in the chest and said, "You're on the bus already, you fuck!"

SS: So, did you guys have a trial?

RD: It ended up being dismissed – ACD – Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal. And, interesting enough, I shared the seat on that bus with Marsha P. Johnson, which was quite curious. It would be interesting to have seen her interview – depending on whether she was drinking that day or not – Marsha P for "Pay it No Mind" Johnson. But it was also interesting to be in cells – there'd be guys making out in the cells, making the cops go crazy and stuff like that.

SS: So, who was in Wave III? When you had that potluck – whose house did you meet at?

RD: Well, Wave III ended up being Mark Harrington and Jim Eigo and Kayton
00:25:00 Kurowski, Marvin Shulman. We'd meet at Marvin Shulman's high-rise apartment on the Upper East Side with the Warhol prints on the wall and the antiques and stuff that was always kind of luxe. He ended up, arranging that we have a weekend on Fire Island at Tommy Tune's house, which I unfortunately missed. But – I think I'm the only queer in New York that's never been to Fire Island. Let's see – who else – the group of people expanded and contracted over the years – Brian Damage was in it at one point. Russell Pritchard, Pam Earing – a lot of people. We ended up doing a bunch of things on our own that were pretty successful over the years. The takeovers of Stephen Joseph' office – a lot of those people were Wave III.

SS: Can you explain what the Stephen Joseph situation was?

RD: Well, Stephen Joseph –- I don't know what his orders were from the city – but, to make it seem like the problem of AIDS in New York was much less than it was,

he just cut the numbers.

SS: And who was he?

RD: He was the New York City Commissioner of Health.

SS: And he was appointed by which Mayor?

RD: He was Koch's guy. You're very good at prompting, thank you. He was Ed Koch's last Commissioner of Health, and another curious thing is Ann Northrop lived in the building on the next street, which, her back windows looked into his apartment. So, she saw him one time painting the apartment. He was wearing an old pair of red long johns and a shower cap. He's this big guy with a beard. He was kind of cute, and I told him that one time. He shaved his beard, and I said, Steve, you were much cuter with the beard, when we were giving him a hard time, one time. Probably the funniest moment with Stephen Joseph was that Bill Monahan and he ended up in a revolving door together – in the same compartment of a revolving door – at the Ford Foundation. And Stephen Joseph yelling at Bill Monahan, who was a good head taller than him: "Don't you touch me you little fuck!"

We ended up doing this thing – I mean, when the numbers were cut, everybody was pissed off about it. And I fully believe that I'm the one that said, let's go to his office and tell him we're pissed off, which we sat down and did. That whole deal became known as the "Surrender Dorothy" campaign. We decided we were just going to dog Stephen Joseph and make his life a living hell. So, Ron Goldberg mentioned – oh yeah, somebody said sky write it, and Ron Goldberg said, yeah, like "Surrender Dorothy," in *The Wizard of Oz*. So, we would find out that he'd had a lunch appointment with

somebody and we'd show up at the restaurant. We'd find out he'd had some kind of meeting at the Ford Foundation – we'd show up there and give him a hard time. We ended up taking over his office twice. I was there on the first one. There was a second one, which there's a great videotape of. One of the people – and I'm blanking on his real name – showed up in semi-drag, wearing a sundress and sunglasses. I'm blanking on his name, but his drag name was Spree De Corp [SPREE]. I'll remember it. But the first one – we had scoped out the Health Department, because people had been going there with legitimate business. So, we all met up in a bathroom on Stephen Joseph' floor, and stayed there until the proper time, and then we all made for the door. And the guard blocked us from getting to the correct door. So, I got up and went over and leaned

00:30:00 against another door that we figured – maybe there's a connecting door in the inner office. So, I'm sitting off by myself, about 15 feet down the hall, leaning against the door, and somebody opened the door and I fell right back in. And, the guards made a dash for me, but by the time they were wrestling me and I'd grabbed a Xerox machine. It looked like Thursday night wrestling on TV. And, by that time, everybody was in the room, blocking it. And, we were having great fun. A *Voice* photographer was in there hanging out. And, eventually, they grabbed us and dragged us out of there and gave us all desk appearance tickets and we were back at the demo, before the demo was over. Those were the days.

SS: What was the demand?

RD: The demand was that they do accurate case reporting in New York.

SS: How did you know that the numbers were cooked?

RD: I'm not the statistician. I'm not the theoretician. I'm not the person who can read medical text, but that's essentially what had happened – was that, suddenly, the caseload went from X number to X number, and, obviously, there was some problem in there. If trained officials were saying the number was X one day, and Y the next day, why had it suddenly changed?

SS: Was there anyone in Wave III who was sort of an expert on statistics?

RD: Sure, Jim Eigo and Mark Harrington later on were TAG/Treatment and Data Committee. Gary Kleinman was in Wave III. The names will pop up – Deborah Gavito.

SS: How did you find out who he was having lunch with? Where was the leak?

RD: When we did one of the sit-ins in his office, somebody nabbed his schedule off the desk. We also had friends in the office, but snagging his schedule was a real coup. We also had – someone had snagged a phone book, so we had all the interoffice numbers. Barry Walters used to refer to us as "resourceful queens."

SS: So, how did the Stephen Joseph saga resolve?

RD: Well, the folks that were arrested the second time – which, something was on that I couldn't go to, or I would have been there – decided to go to trial, rather than take a fine or whatever. Rather than plead guilty and that kind of stuff, they just went to trial. And, they were found guilty, much merriment and mayhem later. And no one every insisted that they serve – I think it was community service. I don't think there was actual jail time over it. I don't think it was a fine. Mark Harrington, for example, could

tell you what the end up of all of that was. But it was interesting. The idea that – well, we're just going to waste your time in court. Josephs had to show up. I don't think Josephs actually showed up. We were pressing for him to show up. We were pressing for Koch to show up. We were going to do our best to make this a political trial.

SS: And so, what finally happened to Stephen Joseph?

RD: He ended up in Washington, where all scoundrels go. I think I saw something about him – he had come here from Alaska, and he's some kind of brown-noser for the FDA or something, now. He's Vice President in charge of sitting by the door somewhere. He's still around. I've seen the name recently, but I couldn't tell you what he does.

SS: So, Wave III – how often would you guys get together?

RD: Every couple of weeks, once a month. One of the first things that we did after we got together was a demonstration at MOMA. I mentioned that I'd been involved with Gran Fury and – I do printmaking, I do screen printing, and I had done a print for an artist named Luis [Cruz] Azaceta that was in a show at MOMA called "Committed to Print". And I went to the opening. This was an exhibition about political graphics. All
00:35:00 of the graphics in this show had a political bent to them. I went through the entire show. There was nothing in the show that had anything about AIDS. There was only one piece in the show – a Robert Arneson print that had anything to do with queerdom. Everything else was about gender, about poverty, about gentrification, about nuclear disarmament – you name it – feminist issues, Black issues – nothing in there about queerdom, and definitely, nothing about AIDS. I brought this to Gran Fury, and I said, we ought to go

do something. We're the arts arm of ACT UP, and the folks in Gran Fury were too concerned about their careers as artists to go fuck with MOMA. Some of those people are going to see this and be pissed at me. But that's true. They didn't want to fuck up their careers. They wanted to keep their mouth shut about it. So, I brought it to Wave III. Actually, Mark Harrington had been involved with Gran Fury for awhile. So, he and I talked about it. They were hot for it. With a couple of other people, and some free passes from someone I knew who worked at MOMA, we went over there and put up ACT UP posters on the wall and caused a ruckus in the place.

SS: What happened?

RD: We got thrown out. The guards grabbed Harrington and another person and kept them corralled by the elevator that takes you up to the Members' Dining Room, for awhile. They were going to arrest him, until we just caused too much trouble and they threw us all out.

SS: And which posters did you put up?

RD: Silence = Death, the AIDSGATE poster, the Vote poster – all things that were big graphics for right around then.

SS: When did MOMA start recognizing that AIDS existed, in terms of their programming?

RD: You got me, but it was pretty soon after that – by their next big print retrospective that Deborah Wye put together. She put together "Committed to Print" – there was definitely AIDS graphics in that, in fact, stuff that they bought from us.

SS: From ACT UP?

RD: From ACT UP.

SS: So, what other things did Wave III do?

RD: There was another MOMA thing, too. About a year after that, there was an exhibition of photos by Nicholas Nixon, and several people in ACT UP were really annoyed at it because it showed all these limp, sad, I'm-about-to-die people with AIDS. Alexis Danzig was the main focus behind this. So, we went there one night – I think Thursday was their free night, or something – we went there and handed out fliers in the exhibition. They didn't throw us out. They weren't happy. They told us not to hand out fliers. We said, we'll do what we want.

SS: And what was the critique on the fliers?

RD: The critique was that people with AIDS have fun, too. Just look at all the Sustiva ads that they run in *POZ* now, for example, and you'd know gay guys have tons of muscles, and they're having fun and climbing rocks, and sailing sail boats and whatever. But, at that time, the image of AIDS was – this person all emaciated, dying. And I'm not a real fan of Mr. Nixon's work but, one of the things that he does is he documents people over a time span. So, there were photos of this person with AIDS, who was just wasting away in front of the camera. It might have been compelling art, but it was as real downer, if you were trying to deal with the images of AIDS for public consumption.

SS: Did you deal with him directly?

RD: No, I don't even think he lives in New York. I don't know where he lives.

SS: Do you think that was a censorship action?

RD: No. Censorship would have been us going there and demanding the pictures being taken down, or us going there and trying to take them down ourselves. By going there and flyering and saying there are other ways of doing this – that's a critique, not a censorship.

JAMES WENTZY: We have to change tapes.

SS: Oh, we have to change tapes.

RD: How long are the tapes?

JW: 40 minutes.

00:40:00 **SS: So, in terms of Wave III's relationship to MOMA – from what you're telling me, there were two demands: one was representation, and the second was, a certain kind of representation.**

RD: Well, yes, a certain kind of representation, because at that point in the media, when you would see someone with AIDS, it was always this mopey Jesus, pieta kind of thing. It was always, oh, look at this poor person, they're about to die, don't you feel sorry for them? And the people I met in ACT UP were not ready to die. They were going to kick some ass before they died.

SS: But where did this conversation take place, where you developed a collective sense about representation to such an extent that you could agree on an action like that – that's a lot of theoretical leaps.

RD: Well, you know, like with Queer Nation, people could bring an action, and all they needed was someone who was willing to go along with it. You didn't necessarily have to sit there and debate every fine point of theory. We didn't sit there and say, what

would – I'm blanking now – what would, you know, X philosopher say about this? What would Kant say about this? What would be the Marxist theory of representation of people with AIDS? You wouldn't necessarily do that kind of thing. It's, look, I'm really pissed off about this. I don't think they're showing what needs to be shown. Why don't we go up there and confront them about it?

SS: So, built in was a kind of trust or confidence that if somebody wanted to do an action, probably people would do it. There wasn't a lot of theoretical debate about the focus of the action in Wave III.

RD: Right, in Wave III. The Nicholas Nixon one wasn't specifically Wave III. That was more Alexis Danzig's own thing, because that was a bee in her bonnet. And some of us went along with her. But it was sort of interesting. It was like the culture workers back in the '60s, picketing at MOMA for "supporting" the war in Vietnam. MOMA, per se, didn't support the war in Vietnam, but there are these leaps of – yeah, I see where you're saying that there are leaps of philosophy in there, but this was about specific instances. This was about two exhibitions that things were done.

SS: Was there any debate in ACT UP about taking on an elite art institution?

RD: No. There was some debate in Gran Fury about that, and I think that ended up being pooh-poohed because of career concerns.

SS: We'll get to that in a second. I just want to ask you one more thing about Stephen Joseph – sorry to go back to that.

RD: Sure, not a problem.

SS: Was there ever a point where people in ACT UP felt that he was being harassed?

RD: We felt that it was his job to be harassed if he was going to be the running dog lackey – to use the radical rhetoric – that if he was going to be manipulated into telling lies about AIDS in New York, that he deserved it. We sort of did the same thing later on, but not as extensively, with Woody Myers. I mean, Woody Myers didn't get –

SS: Who is Woody Myers?

RD: Woody Myers was his successor. He was David Dinkins' Commissioner of Health. Although, I think, because Woody Myers was Black, he didn't get the same kind of treatment that Stephen Joseph did. I think that under Dinkins, people felt like, he's on our side, we should back off a little bit, and I think that there were also – in the case of Woody Myers – we don't want to be seen as harassing a black man.

SS: What was the demand on Woody Myers?

RD: Woody Myers was just incompetent. I don't remember specifically what demands were and what specifically he did, offhand. But he was just completely incompetent.

SS: Wasn't there an incident with Steve Quester, where there was a harassment charge about Stephen Joseph?

RD: I actually thought about that. One night, a bunch of us went to Stephen Joseph' house, and picketed out in front of it.

SS: Where was it?

RD: West 70s, I think, West 80s – Upper West Side – not far from Central

Park. And Steve Quester had been dating this guy that wasn't all there and they went
00:45:00 back to Steve Quester's house for a night of fun, radical romp. And during the course of the evening, this guy calls Stephen Joseph' home phone from Steve Quester's house, apparently, because in the middle of the night, the cops show up and push Quester around: "We're coming in! We don't need a warrant!" – harassed him. They didn't arrest him, but they did everything but. And this was quite serious, because this sort of Gestapo crap hadn't happened, really, to anybody so far. But they were trying to claim that death threats had been made – which, it's more like, I have no idea what was said on the phone call, but apparently, one was made from Steve Quester's phone.

SS: And how did ACT UP respond when that happened?

RD: You know, I'm blanking on that right now. Steven Quester could probably tell you better, if you've interviewed him. But I know that there was probably consultation of lawyers and whatever. But I don't think it really went much further than that. I think they decided that there was no real threat. They just showed up and intimidated Steve Quester, and that was kind of it. Although, all of us that were active in the group had clicks and hums and weird things on our telephones. It was quite easy to get our phone numbers. The contact sheet was on the back table every week.

SS: So, what else did Wave III do? You say, it had ended when Brian Damage got sick.

RD: Well, Brian Damage was an East Village artist. He was involved with the group around Shox Lumania, which was a band that was sort of what Fischerspooner is now – high concept, big costumes, total performance kind of thing. And the folks in

Shox Lumania were sort of poised to break out of the East Village and be the next big thing and they started dying like flies. And Brian had been involved with them, and got really sick, and had gotten involved with Wave III. I seem to remember Kayton Kurowski saying, oh there's this really cool guy, you've got to meet him, I want him in Wave III. And then, suddenly, there's Brian. And Brian was very cool. He was smart, he was funny, he was really talented and he was also very sick. And, for the last year of his life – I mean, he had neuropathy, he couldn't eat, he was getting meals on wheels delivered to his house – God's Love We Deliver. Things just kept going downhill with him, and he sort of became the Wave III pet project. He had gotten bad enough, that we wanted someone there with him on a daily basis, to make sure that he got his food – that someone went out and got his little Sherman cigars, and if you got the green package instead of the blue package, there was a problem. And, if he sent you out to Veselka for the sandwich and you didn't get the gravy on it, but you got – it had to be exactly right, or I'd hear about it.

There's a film that Bob Huff made that ended up becoming a piece in World War III comics. Brian was involved with World War III. Brian also never finished, but they got it far enough that it was publishable – did a comic strip for World War III about the HIV virus and vampires and secret of the pyramids. It was fantasy, but it was curious. And, unfortunately, rather than sitting there and drawing every single thing like he'd been doing, some of the pages are just sketched in. But he was sick enough that we wanted to get the thing published before he died. And he did. And then, the next Wave III project, we did a memorial exhibit for him. I mean, the actual artwork that we could get together

was kind of slight, but it was his. He was just really incredible.

SS: What was his real last name, do you know?

RD: I couldn't tell you.

SS: Had you ever been in a support group before?

RD: No.

SS: Was that the first person really close to you who died of AIDS?

RD: Yes. There were other people in the group that you would hear – so and so died – Vito Russo, for example, was the first person from the group that I could remember, offhand, hearing about dying. And you'd see Vito and you'd hear him speak, and he would just be full of fire and you thought he was astride the city like a colossus, and the next thing you know – gone. Marty Robinson was like that. I didn't know Vito or Marty very well, but I've seen old pictures of Marty, he'd been around for forever, and Marty was a little bit, sort of out there by the time I knew him in ACT UP. In the group, people would just, 'did you hear about?' Every two or three weeks there'd be somebody.

00:50:00

SS: How come you guys ended up responsible for Brian Damage, where was his family?

RD: Family was in other states. I don't think he was very close to his father. His mother, I think lives in DC or lived near DC. He just became the project. He was the Wave III mascot.

SS: Why did you guys stop functioning after that?

RD: I think all of us had burned out. Certainly, people's interests had changed. There was a heavy concentration of Treatment and Data people in Wave III, and they

became very much involved in that and that's along the time where TAG broke off. Treatment and Data broke off and became TAG, which was a really bad thing because people like Mark Harrington – like I've said before, I trust Mark with my life – and yet, every week, Mark is getting grilled on the floor because he's going to this government meeting and he has specific instructions from ACT UP as to what his position should be, and he doesn't want to go with it. And, I think in his head, he wanted to do the right thing, but the real thing that broke Treatment and Data off from ACT UP and formed TAG was women's issues.

SS: Like what?

RD: I don't remember the specific issues, but I know that there was a list of certain things because in clinical trials women were not considered because their body chemistry – being very different from men – things that would work in men wouldn't necessarily work in women, or the dosages would be different or whatever. And so, Treatment and Data was told to go to the FDA and the other committees that they went to and insist that women be given equal access, which I think is a fair thing, and I think it's a right thing. And Treatment and Data at that point had gotten a little too inside, meaning that they were a little too cozy with the government people they were working with and they wouldn't buck them for the sake of what their marching orders were from ACT UP. I'm not saying that they were doing anything nefarious, but they weren't fighting for the issues that they had been told to fight for by the floor.

SS: And why wouldn't they?

RD: Again, I think they had gotten too chummy with the FDA, and the other –

SS: So, they thought they would lose their credibility with the government?

RD: No, I think that the FDA and the other government agencies had convinced them this is what we should be doing.

SS: What?

RD: Had convinced Treatment and Data that the way we're doing things is fine. The women had a meeting with – I'm a little bit hazy on this – but the women had had a meeting with some government officials – this is what we want, and they had gotten nowhere with it. So, they were getting nowhere, directly going to government officials and their representatives from ACT UP – the Treatment and Data people – were going down there and not pressing those demands, which was not right.

SS: Okay, let's go back to Gran Fury. So, you were a working artist, you came into ACT UP, there were a lot of working artists in ACT UP, how did you first get involved with Gran Fury?

RD: I went to a new member orientation and I said, you know, this is the kind of stuff I do. I do screen-printing, I do graphics, I do whatever – where would be a good
00:55:00 place for me, because I've been seeing graphics around town involved with ACT UP. And one of the people said, well, why don't you talk to Gran Fury. So, I made the acquaintance, and went to several meetings. And, by the time of the Wall Street Action – the Gran Fury thing for the second Wall Street – the first anniversary action – was a group of dollar bills. There was a one, a 50, and a 100, I believe, and each one – they were Xeroxed on green paper, and on the backside there was a text. One of the texts

came from me and it was, "If You Think Straight White Males Can't Get AIDS, Don't Bank On It." Tom Kalin was the real power in Gran Fury, at that point, and Tom Kalin's big favorite was: "Fuck Your Profiteering, People Are Dying While You Play Business." And I remember handing these things out early before the demonstration, and some guy read the "Fuck Your Profiteering" one – to be quite honest, I think they printed a lot more of them than the other ones – came back and shoved it into the cleavage of my coat – is cleavage the right word?

SS: Sure.

RD: We'll go with that – shoved it into my coat and walked off. So, he, at least, got the message. I don't know if he got the right message or not.

SS: Now, where was Gran Fury meeting at this time?

RD: They were either meeting over at Tripod – I think it was Tripod.

SS: What's that?

RD: Todd Haynes and – I'm blanking on her name – Christine Vachon had a film company [Apparatus], and we met there a few times. But largely we'd meet at the Whitney graduate program workspace – whatever that thing is – which is near here – Broadway, just south of Canal.

SS: Were there people in Gran Fury who were in the Whitney program?

RD: Yeah, Tom Kalin.

SS: He was in it at the time?

RD: I think so.

SS: So, who was in Gran Fury?

RD: Avram Finkelstein, Tom Kalin, Todd Haynes. While I was in it, Mark Harrington and Donald Moffett, of course. Other people came and went at various times in there. I think Rob[bin] Murphy was involved in it slightly, but I may be wrong on that. Later on, there were other people in it. But that was my extent of it.

SS: You said that the slogan that you chose was, "If you think that Straight White Men Can't Get AIDS" –

RD: Don't bank on it.

SS: But can they?

RD: If you think they can't –

SS: Right. What was the thought behind it?

RD: The thought was that at the time, people thought that only queers and Haitians got AIDS.

SS: Right. So, that was a strategy.

RD: So, that particular strategy was that anybody can get it. There was this whole idea of – when will AIDS break out into the general population? All these terms sound so archaic at this point. And, the truth of the matter is, is that it has broken out into the general population. I mean, back then, it wasn't the same general population, though. Largely, if you were heterosexual and lived in Iowa, you were probably pretty safe. But drug users and queers and, at the time, Haitians – I'm not sure what that up-tick in the statistics was that made Haitians more likely – but those were the seen risk groups.

SS: What was the motive for ACT UP to try to change the image of AIDS as a gay disease?

RD: As long as AIDS was seen as a gay disease, it wasn't going to be taken seriously by the general public – which means, people who are in charge of funding.

SS: Okay, but the truth is that heterosexual men who don't use drugs never really became a large section of the AIDS population.

01:00:00 RD: No, but it only takes one shot. I mean, you know, if you screw the wrong person, you could get it. There are all kinds of sloganeering from back then, like, a virus has no morals. The truth was, as long as it was seen as being something only queers got, nobody was going to take this seriously. Look at SARS last year, or this year, rather. Governments mobilized all over the globe to take care of SARS and how many people actually got affected by it? Not very many, compared to what was going on with AIDS when ACT UP was being formed.

SS: Do you think that AIDS is considered to be a gay disease now?

RD: Sure, I think it is.

SS: So, you think, ultimately, that was not transformed, that image?

RD: No, I think that it's much more likely that if you say someone has AIDS they're going to say, "I didn't know he was queer."

SS: So, what happened with Gran Fury? How long did you stay there?

RD: There were old, rude jokes from back in the day like, gay means "got AIDS yet?" Or this guy from one of the heavy metal bands had tee-shirt on that said – it had a can of Raid bug spray but instead of Raid it said AIDS and says, "Kills queers dead" or Kills fags dead," something like that. This was the kind of humor that was going on around this and it wasn't really that funny when you had friends that were

dying. Something that just popped up in conversation a couple of weeks ago was – the painter, Mark Kostabi – Mark Kostabi had done this interview in, I think*, New York Magazine,* where he said, "Well, AIDS was really unfortunate, but maybe it was a good thing because it was getting rid of all the gay museum curators and we could use a breath of fresh air in the museum world." These outrageous things would get said. That was probably said to be funny, but a couple of weeks later, Michelangelo Signorile and Michael Musto smacked him in the face with a plate full of butter at some public function. And he's repented that whole thing ever since, but still, you know, that's not real funny. You don't talk about people dying like that and expect that people are going to forgive you about it later on. It's the Donna Summer thing, you know. All of a sudden, Donna Summer who's born again Christian is saying, well, AIDS is God's way of taking care of this stuff. You know, well, Donna Summer wouldn't have had a dime if queers hadn't been buying her disco records all those years. Love to love you baby, I don't think so.

SS: Let's get back to Gran Fury.

RD: Sure.

SS: So, how much longer did you stay in Gran Fury?

RD: I was involved with them about another six months or so – until the Seven Days of Rain. Gran Fury – when I had gotten involved with them, they did the dollar bills for the first anniversary action, and they'd done the "one in 22" image of the baby doll.

SS: What was that?

RD: I'm forgetting the text, but it was about children getting AIDS from HIV positive mothers. And I think the figure in the Bronx was one in 22 babies born in the Bronx that year – it was either the Bronx or Harlem, I don't remember – were HIV infected which, for that period of time, that was a staggering number. And then, there was this group of demonstrations in the spring, that ended up being called the Seven Days of Rage, which became the Seven Days of Rain, because it rained during most of them. And different people in Gran Fury did posters for each one of those and Don Moffett's is probably the most notorious – a huge hard-on that says, "Sexism rears its unprotected head." Then, there was one for the Kiss-In, which was an image that Mark Harrington – Mark Harrington worked at a stock photo house, and he had found this old photo from
01:05:00 old pornography of two sailors kissing. And so, that was the image for the Kiss-In. The women in ACT UP weren't happy with the image of two women, rather sedate, that was found to be the women's version of that, but the men's version of the two sailors with their exposed genitals carefully cropped out was the one that everyone remembered seeing. I did a poster, which never really got any play in all of that. I was feeling kind of adrift in Gran Fury. There was a demonstration up in Harlem about pediatric AIDS that was one of Iris Long's first things that she organized. And I'd gone out and found a photo of this curly-haired blond, Shirley Temple-ish looking baby – not really Shirley Temple, but cute baby, and the headline to go with that was, "Guinea Pig." But those really didn't get seen very much.

SS: How did you guys come up with ideas? What was the process?

RD: Gran Fury started because the curator of the New Museum had offered

their window to do a display, and that was well before I was involved with them and – Don Ruddy was involved in Gran Fury. Don Ruddy is dead now. Don made these things out of concrete – furniture. And, for the windows at the New Museum, they had made these fake stone tablets that were actually concrete and the text on these stone tablets was quotes from different people about AIDS, and how AIDS was perceived, and there was a big backdrop, blow-up photo of the Nuremburg trials, linking the irresponsibility of the government under Reagan with the irresponsibility of the government under Hitler. And there would be these just outrageous remarks about – like, William Buckley saying, I think people with HIV should be tattooed and quarantined. Lights were set up on a timer, so these things would blink on and off, in sequence. And the last one in the sequence was Reagan, and it was a blank tablet, because Reagan had refused to acknowledge that thousands at that time, of the citizens he was governing, had died – complete denial that anything was going on, and I know some queen was doing Nancy's hair at the White House. So, you know, they had contact in there, somehow.

SS: What was the dynamic inside the group? How would guys talk about ideas?

RD: In a way, that was what was the most off-putting for me. I've joked that we would spend a two-hour meeting deciding where to put the comma. Several of the people in Gran Fury were very intellectual and they could probably quote you what [Jacques] Lacan had written about something. A couple of them were hooked up with Douglas Crimp and *October*, and that kind of art criticism really gets me because, say what you mean, you know? "The archetype of the signifier of the disconnect" – it's just

all gibberish. And so, there would be all this gibberish, trying to get around to something that could have been decided in 15 minutes. Because I didn't talk that language, I was, I just felt, I didn't feel really comfortable in Gran Fury. I would rather do my own projects. So, with Wave III, I was able to do my own projects.

For the first Gay Pride, after all of that started, which would have been Gay Pride of '88, I did a Xerox poster. Several of us went out and wheat-pasted around Christopher Street the night before and it said, "Gay Pride Day – What Are You Ashamed of The Other 364?" Apparently, someone didn't like them because they were all ripped down – or many of them were ripped down. The working methods of Gran Fury just didn't really work for me.

SS: So, this kind of difference between people who were into the theory,

01:10:00 **and people for whom that didn't make sense or wasn't relevant – was that also a social difference? Would you socialize with those guys?**

RD: Outside of ACT UP, the people that I would socialize with ended up being, largely, Wave III people. There were other – Loring McAlpin was also in Gran Fury – like Loring had me silkscreen a piece for him. I was on friendly terms with him, it's just that our heads didn't work collaboratively, together.

SS: Was there a conflict between people who were trying to build competitive art careers and people who were not on that track?

RD: See, in a manner of speaking, I always felt that careerism had a big place in Gran Fury. I mean, they ended up at the Venice Biennale; they ended up in the Whitney Biennial. They were in the magazines. They were the flavor of the month for a

little while there. And that's all well and good, but this wasn't, necessarily, a career building thing for me and quite obviously, because what career do I have? But there were people who did this sort of stuff professionally and, you know, oh, this will look good in my portfolio was never something that I thought about, personally.

SS: Was there an aesthetic discussion? Would you guys decide what the look was of Gran Fury?

RD: Well, the look in Gran Fury was always something borrowed from advertising. It always had a graphic designery feel to it. Their "Kissing Doesn't Kill" posters –one of their better-known images – and that was a rip-off of Benetton.

SS: And why was advertising the referent point?

RD: Because it was taking the tools of the oppressor and turning them against them, in a manner of speaking. If you've got Madison Avenue and millions of dollars of advertising behind you, people will listen to you. Everyone knows that that little boomerang thing means; everyone knows what that squiggle means under the word Coke. If you see people walking down the street, and they have a hat with a Kangaroo on it, you know it's a Kangol. It's all about branding and identifying and, in way, it was turning AIDS-speak into advertising. It was PR for the AIDS activist movement.

SS: Was it discussed that way, overtly?

RD: Yeah. Not every single moment, but that was always something that was a light motif of what was happening in Gran Fury. Definitely, they were using the vehicle of advertising to advertise AIDS activism.

SS: What was the broader influence of –

RD: One of the things that I did later on, on my own, was a poster – to carry that a step further – it just says "AIDS." Very large, with a copyright symbol next to it, and then the tag line under it is: "It's Big Business, But Who's Making A Killing?" We ended up using them around the time of one of our Wall Street things later on – not a major action, but a good sized one. But, with that, I wanted to commodify AIDS and make it a brand name. I had the idea, what if you copyrighted the word AIDS, as a brand, and then, you could sue people, if they didn't use it correctly. I mean, there was all of this stuff going on. Very well-meaning people would come to an ACT UP meeting and want to talk, but they'd use the word AIDS "victim" or AIDS "sufferer," and they'd get booed down. There was this whole discourse about use of the term AIDS sufferer or AIDS victim, where people wanted to hear "People With AIDS," or PWA, and you know, 20 years on, people are still talking about AIDS victim, AIDS sufferer. It just never – we even had a buzzword fact sheet that we would give out to the press when we would have interviews or press conferences or, we're doing this action, here, take this – help to instruct on how to write about AIDS, and apparently, some of the people writing about AIDS would do that, but then, their editors would override it and say AIDS victim or AIDS sufferer.

SS: I want to move into a new area of discussion. You're still in ACT UP.

01:15:00 RD: Yup.

SS: Why did you decide to stay?

RD: It just felt like the right thing. To be quite honest, I'm not as active as I should be. What's needed now is people who are more theoreticians – people who can

identify, this is something that's getting ready to come on the horizon, we need to work on this. And, unfortunately, there are so few people in ACT UP now, that everyone is spread really thin. I'm still involved in it, but part of me feels like I'm tangentially involved, even though I'm fairly regular at meetings.

SS: How many people are now involved in ACT UP?

RD: We've just had, yet another schism go on a couple of months ago. You'll probably get 15 people at a meeting, whereas, we were getting 20 people at a meeting, before that.

SS: And what is the active focus at the moment?

RD: The active focus at the moment is AIDS in prison. There are a couple of people who are working on that, that want to see condoms distributed in New York State prisons, in particular; other prison issues, in general. Apparently, it's not illegal to give out condoms in jails in New York. But, with Pataki in power – the head of prisons is, I think, [Antonia] Novello [Commissioner, New York State Department of Health], and he says, you have to talk to Pataki, and Pataki says, you have to talk to Novello. So, they're pointing fingers at each other.

SS: Why is prison the focus for ACT UP?

RD: Because that's what people want to work on.

SS: Do you know why?

RD: I'm not sure why the people who are working on it have chosen that as a focus for them, you'd have to ask them. We have been doing, over the last year, AIDS in Africa stuff. But there's another group that is called Health Gap, and my feeling was that

even though some of the people in Health Gap came from ACT UP, I felt like ACT UP was being used for its name value. I feel like Health Gap did a Trojan horse kind of thing with ACT UP, where they insinuated their issues into ACT UP. And being that Health Gap pays their people – Health Gap is not a volunteer organization, it has paid staff members.

SS: Who funds it?

RD: It's funded by grants. Who funds it was a big question. Where do they get their money? We've had a couple of these showdowns that happen in any kind of group, on a periodic basis. And the Health Gap people seem to have disappeared, although, they're sending their issues to ACT UP, sort of under subterfuge, at this point. Many of their issues, I agree with. There was a campaign to pressure Coca-Cola into giving full health benefits to all their workers in Africa, that I thought was misguided, because even if it succeeded, we're only talking about a couple of thousand people – 10,000 people, I believe, was the maximum number. But, whereas, if the same amount of energy had been spent on a more general issue, I think it would have had more bang for the buck. Health Gap paid for a giant, inflatable Coca-Cola bottle. ACT UP put it on the back of a truck and toted it around at last year's Gay Pride – Gay Pride of 2002. No one seemed to have gotten the message as to what a big Coca-Cola bottle was doing on a float. Health Gap got nervous that they would be sued by Coca-Cola, and so they didn't even put the name Coca-Cola or Death Cola, or there were several other variants of what could go on there – on the bottle. I think it was poorly done and poorly executed and that energy could have been spent elsewhere, but because the people that are involved in

Health Gap feel they know best, there's been a conflict with several people in ACT UP, with several people that are involved in Health Gap. And then, the third party is, why can't we just get along – thank you, Rodney King.

01:20:00 **SS: I want to ask you a little more about being in ACT UP for all this time – 15 years.**

RD: It's been a long, strange trip, as they say.

SS: What do you think your life would be like, if you left ACT UP? How do you think your life would change?

RD: You know, I've thought about it. In a way, there would be less aggravation, but in a way, ACT UP's been my career, in a sort of, rather freelance, temp position kind of career. But, what's really odd now is that a lot of my relationship to ACT UP is I'll get requests for materials, and I'm the fulfillment person for T-shirts. So, if people see the website and want a T-shirt, they call me up or e-mail me or whatever, and it's kind of interesting that I have this archive of stuff that people keep wanting to borrow for things.

SS: What kinds of things?

RD: Graphics – posters, fliers – that's what people look for.

SS: Who are the other long-term people who are still involved?

RD: Well, I suppose I can say Ann Northrop is still involved, although tangentially. James

SS: James Wentzy.

RD: James Wentzy, our cameraman, although tangentially – he doesn't come

to meetings. Of the people who are actively at meetings – Ken Bing has been there for quite awhile; Mark Milano has been there awhile; Mel Stevens has been there for awhile – Mel's boyfriend, who comes on occasion. That was interesting – Mel's boyfriend, Tim – what's Tim's last name James? I'll think of it, in a minute. The first night Tim came, he and his boyfriend, at the time, were both wearing business suits and trench coats and they were looking so lost, I was convinced they were cops, so I had them read the "If you're an off-duty member of the police department, you have to identify yourself" thing, again. He's still annoyed. He doesn't know it was me that did that, though. He's still annoyed about that.

SS: So, what actions were you involved in organizing?

RD: Well, the Wave III things – definitely. I've had parts in a lot of stuff – not necessarily the big parts – graphics for stuff. Like when we went to Kennebunkport to visit George Bush the Senior – King Bush I – on his country estate, Avram Finkelstein and Maxine Wolfe and some other people had an idea for doing "Stop AIDS" street signs. I don't remember precisely what the text was, offhand. So, I screen printed these things on metal that they nailed to light poles all over Kennebunkport.

SS: This was when Bush was in office.

RD: This was when George, the first, was in office, yes.

SS: And what was the demand?

RD: I'm sure there were a whole bunch of demands, but the main demand was to make AIDS a priority. I remember one of the chants from going to Kennebunkport. That was when saying something, and then saying "not" behind it was at the height of its

fashionability. And the chant would go up: "George Bush, on his yacht, fighting AIDS. Not." So, that was interesting, because the big plans was to – we got a batch of army surplus stretchers and the idea was to pick people up and carry them on the stretchers to as close to the police line as we could and leave them there. But first of all, do you know how heavy some of those people can be? I mean, even with two or four people carrying a person, it takes a lot of effort to carry somebody. And second, they were army surplus stretchers, and so, they were dry-rotted. So, people would fall right out of them. Rip. We ended up with a bunch of them left at the ACT UP workspace for a while, and I always wanted to paint something on them and leave them in places around town, but I think they just got ditched, when we moved out.

01:25:00 **SS: So, what happened? Just busloads of ACT UPpers just arrived at Kennebunkport?**

RD: Multi busloads. Yes. I'm blanking on the guy's name, but one guy did up in Barbara Bush drag. Who?

JW: John Finkelstein

SS: John Finkelstein?

RD: Could be, that's not the person I was thinking of. The whole town was completely freaked out that we were going to be the barbarian hoards because Kennebunkport is pretty darn tiny. And I think we were actually pretty well behaved and bought stuff in the stores. I know I had a nice lobster dinner after the to-do – went wading.

SS: What was the actual action?

RD: The actual action was to march through town, march as far as we could to the Bush compound.

JW: It was Labor Day.

RD: It was Labor Day, 1992, and we marched from – the cops knew we were coming, and they were putting the buses here and there. People were staying in hotels, halfway there, or within striking distance of there, so we could be there pretty quickly in the morning, and the main thing was a march through town – to Walker's Point – as in George Herbert Walker Bush. And then some people did their body builder routine of carrying people, falling through their stretchers up to the compound. And there was a lot of yelling and hollering and that was it.

SS: What did Wave III do for the FDA?

RD: Well, Wave III did up a whole thing, where I screen-printed the backs of a bunch of lab coats with biohazard signs. The FDA was pretty spectacular for me, because Richard Elovich and I – first thing, off in the morning – we were standing around, bored, at the subway station, waiting to march over to the FDA, and I grabbed a can of spray paint from someone and started writing "The FDA has blood on its hands" only to have someone tap on my shoulder and take me into custody. So, I was the first arrest of the day, and it was pretty spectacular, because they grabbed me, and wrestled me around and the crowd was in their way. They were really stupid. They just drive the police car right up into the crowd, almost running people over, and they bundled me into the front seat, and, of course, I undid the door and got out. And then, they grabbed me, and I was handcuffed in front of me, but then they grabbed me and put me upside down

in the backseat, so my head's on the floorboard, with my legs up in the air. There've been times when I've had my legs up in the air, but this is totally different.

SS: This is not consensual.

RD: Not consensual. My nose bleeds really easily, so that was real effective. I had all this blood on my face, and they take me out to the National Guard armory, where everyone's going to get brought, and I'm the first, wild-eyed barbarian there, of the day. So, everybody's looking at me, like, what just dropped in from Mars. And, they fingerprinted me, and then, wouldn't give me anything to wipe my hands with, so I wiped them on the wall. And, because they were going to get me for 10 million dollars of destruction of property – the cost of the subway station – they put me in a van outside, guarded by two state cops for the rest of the afternoon. And, we had all, in Wave III, agreed to give our name as – I've forgotten the name of the health official at the FDA – but we could tell each other apart by our middle initial. So, I was "John Q. Public." My initial was Q. I'm blanking on

JW: Kessler

RD: It wasn't Kessler, it was someone lower down. He was the person in charge of a specific thing that Wave III was working on because we had the brain trust of Jim Eigo and Mark Harrington, in Wave III. So, the rest of them – while everyone is over in front of the FDA, they went in a side building and were hanging around, and they were writing on the chalkboard. And they were giving a teach-in for each other in one of the buildings of the FDA, before some security guard shooed them out.

But, they had me locked up in this thing for, I would say, about four hours. And

01:30:00 the gym where everybody was, was just on the other side of a chain link fence, from where the van I was in was parked. And oh, I was the creature from the Black Lagoon. I was Attila the Hun. Everybody was scared of me, so they were going to keep me in stir for the afternoon, in a van. Well, you know, I was bored, and I had a thing on my key chain, so I was unscrewing whatever screws I could find on the inside of the van. I'm sure the light fixture in the ceiling fell out, not long after that, whatever. And, so, it stopped being fun after awhile. They had torn up my wrists from the handcuffs. And I was pretending to be much worse off than I was, and who should come out the door to smoke a cigarette from the gym but David Wojnarowicz. And David was really spectacular that day. He had a big banner on the back of his leather jacket that said, "If I Die of AIDS, Just Throw My Body on the Steps of the FDA", which was one of his lines. He's the person that really came up with the theory of the political funerals, with this piece that he wrote. But, I had met David a couple of times before, and didn't really know him, and I picked that time to – I need to get out and get some air, and the guards went for it – or the bathroom or something. So, I said to David, they're holding me out here incommunicado. Do people inside know I'm here? And they're also refusing me medical treatment Now, I wasn't that bad off, but it sounded real good. And then, the two cops that are guarding me are saying, oh, man, you just did us wrong. If those people inside revolt and hurt some our buddies, we're going to be really mad at you. Yeah, right. That's what's going to happen.

So, a little while later, they get me out of there, and I'm over at the FDA for the very end of the stuff – with the breaking of the glass of the downstairs windows, and

Peter Staley being on the marquee over the door, with posters and stuff. But, I had to have spent four or five hours in the back of that van, waiting for Jill –

SS: Harris.

RD: Harris to bail me out. And, I said, you know that I've given a false name here. She said, I don't care, they know who you are, and we're going to get you out. And there was some back and forth later on, but the charges were eventually dropped – that I was to pay for 10 million dollars worth of subway station. But, for awhile there, it was between me and Stephen Gendin, as to who was the most spectacular arrest, because it just seemed to fall on both of us. My friend, Phyllis always said that if you're ever in trouble, try to look small because the cops will go for the biggest people, because then they figure, if they can subdue the big ones, then the little ones will fall in line.

SS: Well, since Stephen Gendin is dead, why don't you tell us what happened with his arrest?

RD: I'm trying to think about them, but I was never very close with Stephen Gendin, per se. I was thinking about him recently, because I was reading something about – I was reading the *POZ* thing that he and his boyfriend wrote in tandem about his boyfriend becoming infected, and just sitting there thinking, my God, Stephen, you knew what this was all about, how could this have happened? It's amazing, I ran across someone's profile on AOL the other night, and it's someone from ACT UP and they're wanting raw, unsafe sex. I didn't say that I knew them or anything, but how can people be so frigging stupid, this far into things?

SS: Well, how do you understand that? What do you think it's about?

RD: I think fatalism and lack of will. I think it's just this fatalism. Or the person that I'm talking about, having run into on AOL, may already be infected. I don't know. That wasn't mentioned, it was just – you see personal ads, you hear people interviewed, you see stuff on the internet, and everyone wants bareback. And I just find that impossible.

SS: When did that change?

RD: It's been percolating for about the past three years, that I've really been noticing.

SS: So, in the Golden Age, as you put it, of ACT UP, was safe sex part of ACT UP culture?

RD: It was a political act to fuck with rubbers. The whole thing was – there was this whole idea – the epidemic stops with me. The government's not going to take
01:35:00 care of us, we have to take care of ourselves. There was huge amount of lip service – if you will – given to dental dams. Which, I don't know how many women actually used dental dams, but y'know there was, this was the party line. This was it. This is what you have to do. And I find it amazing that the conservatives in Congress are bowing to the religious right and they're cutting mentions of condoms out and safe sex out of sex education. It's all about abstinence only. And nobody's going to do abstinence only. It's mind boggling. These people are murderers. I mean that was the cant from the old, Golden Age of ACT UP, is – these people have blood on their hands. And they do. You have to take responsibility for yourself and who you're having sex with. I haven't screwed without rubbers – one time in 15 years – and I think that that's pretty darn

impressive. I don't think a lot of people can say that. Now, just because you need rubbers to do certain things, doesn't mean you can't do other things, but if there's a dick going in an ass, you have to put latex on it. It's that simple, and you can't trust people to tell you the truth about their sero-positive or negative status. I heard recently, the only way you know if someone's telling you the truth is if they tell you they're positive.

SS: What would it take to go back to safe sex as a standard?

RD: I wish I knew. I think that people have gotten so used to AIDS as a fact of life, that they just think, "Oh well." There are all these drugs. People are living longer. You see these ads for Sustiva, and it's body builders climbing mountains. There's this whole – it's a debate whether it's a myth or not, of bug chasers and gift givers thing going on. I've actually seen that kind of rhetoric on the internet, where people are looking to get infected, or claim they are. It's mind boggling. They haven't seen my friends dead. They haven't seen my friends weighing 80 pounds, when they used to weigh 250.

SS: So, you think that the reason behind it is lack of awareness about what AIDS is?

RD: No, it's not lack of awareness. In a way, it's lack of awareness, because they haven't seen it firsthand, but, more importantly, it's complacency. AIDS is a fact of life, it's here, it's always going to be here, I may as well have some fun, while I'm at it. I just find it amazing. What can I say?

SS: Well, it's complicated, because on one hand, you totally understand it, and on the other hand, you find it amazing.

RD: Because I understand it, doesn't mean I'm going to accept it. I understand that the Republicans are evil bastards, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to stop fighting against them. Let me put it this way – Democrats are evil bastards, too, but they're usually the lesser of two evils.

SS: But, what's the relationship between the loss of safe sex as a standard, and the way gay people's status is changing in this country?

RD: I don't know that there's a correlation with that. I see them as being two different things, and I think that the change of status is, largely, media hype. You see a lot about it in – what was it – about eight years ago, there was this whole lesbian chic thing? Well, this year, it's cool to be queer because of "Will and Grace" and the thing in the Supreme Court, and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and all this crap, and I think it's about perception. I said something to someone who was yelling into their cell phone next to me in line at the post office yesterday, and he called me a faggot, which was kind of interesting, because I couldn't have called him the N word. That's something that's really had me steamed for a couple of days, because it's not okay to say certain words, but it's perfectly okay to call somebody a faggot, right off the bat. And it also seems to be that people who would know better are the ones who do it.

SS: Well, this goes right back to the Wave III discussion about

01:40:00 **representation, because what I hear you saying is that there is all this representation of gay people, but it's not a kind of representation that can –**

RD: It's a representation in the media, but it doesn't have anything to do with real, day-to-day reality. Just because someone watches "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy"

doesn't mean that they're not going to call you faggot on the street.

SS: Why?

RD: I wish I knew. It has not been made politically and socially grounds for being ostracized the way the N word has, for example.

SS: Do you feel that Black people are better off now than they were?

RD: No. I think that Black people – well, maybe – I don't know. I'm not Black, I can't really answer that. The media perception is, well, you know, there's the WB channel, so Black people are everywhere. Or is it Fox? Ask a Black person if they're better off nowadays – I can't answer that. But what I am saying is that it's not polite to use the N word in general public, but it's perfectly all right to use the F word, meaning faggot.

SS: Let's get back to ACT UP.

RD: Sorry. Was that too polemical?

SS: No, it's fine.

RD: Was that not polemical enough?

SS: What was your experience of Stop the Church? Were you involved in the organizing for that?

RD: Not so much with the organizing, although, there was a poster that I did with – I started to say the name. We did a poster, "Know Your Scumbags." It says in real big red letters: "Know Your Scumbags." It has an unrolled condom with a reservoir tip and the head and shoulders of Cardinal O'Connor wearing his miter, which looks strangely like a condom, in shape.

SS: Who was the guy you did it with?

RD: Victor – I'll tell you in a minute. Underneath the condom it says, "This One Fights AIDS" – very small, so you have to read it. They were done – those, and a poster about Stephen Joseph and the "AIDS: It's Big Business", and another poster, were all done at the same time, and they were made to go in the advertising slots of the subway. Back then, there weren't plastic covers over all the advertising, so you could just pull out the old ad and shove a new one in, or shove a new one over the top of the old ad. And they'd ride around until someone figured they weren't supposed to be there. I went out one Sunday morning and must have put up 50 or 80 of those posters, and the only thing anybody said was, "I work at the Health Department, can I have one of those Stephen Joseph ones?" Someone reported back to me, that he had one in his office. So, I don't know where that came from.

SS: What did it say?

RD: "Public Health Menace" – no, "Deadlier Than the Virus: Stephen Joseph, Commissioner of Health", and then it had all this text on the side, as to the kind of crap he had pulled. For Stop the Church, Victor Mendola – he was one of the main organizers of that. There was an actions committee that would meet on Wednesday nights that I was involved with at that point, that a bunch of us would meet at the offices of the American Ballet.

SS: Why were you meeting there?

RD: Because one of the members of the committee worked for them – American Ballet Theater.

SS: Do you remember who it was?

RD: I'm blanking on it, but he and his boyfriend were involved with the American Ballet Theater. It was a free room to meet in. And that's the committee that came up with stuff about the *New York Times*. We did the stickers that said Out of Order, that we put on the *New York Times* boxes, which pissed them off, because they haven't been reporting on AIDS. Because we did that for awhile, they put Gina – a/k/a Pina – Kolata on, as their AIDS reporter, and she was better than nothing, but barely. So, anyhow – the Stop the Church thing – I was not real involved with organizing it, and not being Catholic, I had some misgivings about it, because the intention was to go inside and disrupt and I'm not a Catholic, so I felt like that wasn't my place.

01:45:00 But, for Wave III, we all met at Russell Pritchard's apartment, and assembled a giant condom that I had built out of plastic drop cloth – nice reservoir tip, and all – and filled it with hot air – helium balloons. I had wanted the thing to be like a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon, but we couldn't be sure the thing would be airtight, so we did it with balloons inside, and there just wasn't enough helium versus airspace, to make the thing really float. We spray-painted "Cardinal O'Condom" down the side of it, and there was a nice picture of it in the Village Voice. We carried it over, and held it aloft, and marched around with it, and played with it, and, eventually, ended up throwing it out in the street for the cops to trample on and get annoyed with. And that was the closest anything ever came to a riot, that I was involved in. And I was up at the barricades – this is the north end of – the picket line ended up being from St. Patrick's is 50 to 51. The picket line was across Fifth Avenue, from 49 to 50, and I was about at the

top end, at 50th Street. And I was one of the marshals, after we got rid of this big condom, and there were these idiots in back of us, pushing and shoving, and the cops decided to grab me. And they put the cuffs on too tight, and toted me around, and I was going to be the one they made the scapegoat out of. I was charged with assaulting an officer, inciting to riot, probably littering – a bunch of stuff. And they kept me in jail over the weekend. Going through the sys –

SS: By yourself?

RD: By myself. There were two other people that were arrested, but they were kept not with me, and they weren't ACT UP members. They had just been picked off because the cops have this cute method of grabbing people that are stragglers in the crowd. Just after I was arrested, the crowd marched downtown, and the cops were grabbing people at random, out of the crowd. So, there were these two guys who'd never been to an ACT UP demonstration before, who spent the weekend in the slammer, but because I was a bad hombre, I was kept separate. And, if you've ever been in jail in New York, they give you fried egg sandwiches, which means a fried egg and two slices of bread that's not the freshest – although, they ended up taking me from the Tombs to spend a couple of days up in the 25th precinct in Harlem, where they were feeding us from the local McDonalds. So, twice a day, you would get a hamburger, an order of French fries and a coke, and I said, "Why didn't you get the happy meal? Then I could have had a puzzle." And they said, shut up and eat it. So, the one nice thing was that I had a dime in my pocket that I scratched "Cops Eat Shit" all over the interior of the cell in the paint, as many times as I could. It didn't do any good, but it made me feel good.

And, I think the reason I didn't get beat up, up there – because they were all talking about, I had assaulted a brother officer – was that Vanessa Farrell, who is the police liaison to the lesbian and gay community, came up and visited me, at the behest of ACT UP. Need any blankets, need any this, need any that. No, no, we're fine. A blanket would have been nice. It wouldn't have been my color, but a duvet would have been better.

SS: Did you have to go to court?

RD: Went to court. I went to 13 appearances before it was thrown out of court. They didn't want to prosecute the thing, they wanted it to go away. They wanted me to plead guilty. They wanted me to take a deal. I just said, no, I didn't do this.

SS: Who was the ACT UP lawyer on your case there?

RD: Oh, this was interesting – they would not let me have a lawyer and they said that I made too much money to have a lawyer, and I had had Legal Aid people representing me. So, I said, fine, I'll go pro se, but then, the Legal Aid people could hang around me and advise me. So, I beat the system by doing that.

SS: So, it wasn't ACT UP lawyers?

01:50:00 RD: No, this was Legal Aid. Lesley Yulkowski was involved in that – a great lady, woman, sorry. Leslie was involved with that, and Leslie was great. She had hooked me up with one of the Legal Aid lawyers, but I got told by the court that I couldn't have a Legal Aid lawyer, because I made too much money.

SS: So, how many times were you arrested for ACT UP?

RD: I think, all in all, about seven or eight.

SS: And were you ever convicted, ultimately?

RD: No. They were all either thrown out or not guilty or. Most of them – they just made them go away. The way the legal system works in New York – they love to get rid of cases, and anything they can do to get rid of cases. I mean, my going for 13 court appearances was really unusual. They expected that I would plead to something or take some kind of deal before then. I was ready to go to trial. We would show up and say, we're ready, your honor. In fact, one of the cases – the Legal Aid lawyer who had been working for me, found out that the ADA who was in charge of my case would not be at the next court appearance, because they were on vacation.

And so, I threw a fit in court and I said, your honor, I'm here, I'm ready to go. Why is it the ADA that's in charge of my case – the people have said, not ready, your honor, and they're not ready because the ADA that's in charge of my case is in Bermuda with her feet propped up on vacation. Why do I have to be here and they not have to be here? So, it got to be fun. It was a real bore, but it got to be fun. I ended up having a court appearance the same day as a bunch of other people. I don't remember precisely what that was about. I know that Diamanda Galas was one of those people in that group. And the judge recused herself, which meant that I had to come back again. And she recused herself because she was a lesbian judge and was on the Center's Board of Directors and whatever – I don't remember the woman's name. But she wouldn't come out and say why she was recusing herself. And I said, why are you – I knew, because someone had told me what the story was. I said, why are you recusing yourself, your honor? Is it because of my perceived sexuality? And she just wouldn't tell me. And, I

was this close to saying, look, lady, is it because you're a dyke that you don't want to recuse yourself?

SS: They never recuse themselves because they're homophobic. Why should they recuse themselves for being gay.

RD: Exactly. It was just another dance around. But the folks – there were about 20 people that had been arrested for something – sitting there, as my audience for that. And I gave her that raft of shit, and they all started applauding, which I thought was funny.

SS: I want to ask you a little bit about the human drama of ACT UP. And you brought this up before, part of being in ACT UP – and you brought this up before – but part of being in ACT UP is watching people get sick and die, and at a certain point, at a very rapid pace.

RD: Luckily, there haven't been that many people that I've seen that close up. There have been several. I mean, for example, Bob Rafsky was just amazing. He was always – I have a reputation for being a fire breather, but Rafsky would get going, and when he got really ill – and I think he had neuropathy, and I think he was really uncomfortable and not happy – but he would go off over nothing. You'd say, "Hi, Bob," and he'd go off at you. Bob was just an amazing guy. He's the guy that ended up being on TV with Clinton. Is this right? Clinton, yeah. He ended up confronting on TV. No, I know what the story was – I'm mixing him and George – who has a Greek last name, and I'm blanking on it – George [Plagianos] confronted Clinton at some fundraiser at a town house, upper West Side, when Clinton was running for President, and I'm blanking on his

last name. But anyhow – Rafsky was on "60 Minutes" with Ed Bradley, and Ed Bradley had done a whole thing about him, and he did have a Clinton thing, where he was at a fundraiser and introduced himself to Clinton and said, this is who I am and this is what the problem is, and Clinton did one of his I-feel-your-pain routines.

01:55:00 And Rafsky and I went over to City Hall. This was another thing that was largely Wave III, but it was kind of on the end of Wave III, where a bunch of us went over and blocked the doors to City Hall, and there are three sets of double doors. And I figured that if you had a piece of two-by-four, you could put them between the door handles, and they couldn't open the doors. So, we did that and chained ourselves to the doors, and Bob and I were in the middle door. I'm loud when there's a focus for being loud but chanting or whatever doesn't really work for me. But Bob was amazing. He just kept going. And we all got busted and taken to have our desk appearance tickets and got thrown out and got told, well, don't you go back to City Hall, you guys. But we would do all kinds of crap like that. Going to City Hall was no big deal in those days before it became Camp Giuliani.

SS: Now, you mentioned that you had a boyfriend who you met at the AIDS conference. Which AIDS conference?

RD: The one in Canada, the one in Montreal.

SS: Why did you go up there?

RD: It was the big road trip, we all had to go. There was a planning session in the afternoon, before things really got rolling, and there was this guy that was giving me the eye – looking around corners and stuff – a guy that looked like Bigfoot. And Herman

was never my dream date, but Herman was really nice. How many people will wake you up and say, here's breakfast?

SS: Was he an ACT UP New Yorker guy?

RD: No, he wasn't really, he was from Ohio, and he went up to the AIDS conference, just for grins, to see what was going on, and he had written some things for *RFD*, which is this – nowadays, it's sort of a Radical Faeries thing, but it was a little more rural gay men, in the beginning. He was involved in the Radical Faeries. I could never quite see, running around, wearing a skirt in the woods with glitter in my beard. But, you know, if that's your thing, fine. I don't have the rhythm to do drumming. So, we met up there and then, you know, had this little affair-ette, and then he came down to see me in New York, and showed up and it lasted for a couple of years, and now he's back in Indiana on the farm. New York City, just like I pictured it.

SS: So, is that your only big relationship inside ACT UP, or inside the AIDS movement?

RD: Well –- and again, that was not directly from ACT UP. You would hear these stories about – a couple of people who I won't name were keeping track of who had had more conquests in ACT UP, and they can tell you about that, themselves, when you do their interviews. You know who you are. Another social thing from ACT UP is that a group of people would go to Woody's – the place is still there, but it's under different management. It's a restaurant called Woody's on Seventh Avenue, down near Christopher Street. And so, after the meetings, people would go to Woody's and re-hash, and there would be 30 people in there, on a particular night. And there was a good

helping of Wave III people. Because of the Wave III people, there'd be a good helping of Treatment and Data people. There would be all sorts of people, and that was really fun, because you could actually get to talk to somebody about something other than what the new protease inhibitor was doing – although there was a ton of that, too. The shrimp quesadilla would come, and then you'd start talking about how many members of the Swim Team you had managed to snag. Some would talk about that.

SS: I think we're coming to a close. Is there something important that you feel you'd like to talk about?

RD: I was going to say something to you about David Wojnarowicz and the political funerals.

02:00:00 **SS: You were telling me about David.**

RD: David was pretty amazing, and I screen-printed a print for him that we've been selling for ACT UP. David was one of the most angry people in the world I've ever met. David, on one level, was the nicest, sweetest, kindest person, but he would just go into orbit over – I told him – I had made arrangements to meet up with him to do something involving this print, and I said, "Look, I'm running late, can we do this another day?" And he just flies into this rage about, "I've waited all this time, and I'm dying, and I don't have time to wait around for you!" And, it was like, Jesus, this is way more response than I was expecting.

SS: Did you eventually do the print?

RD: Oh yeah. We did it.

SS: Which one was it?

RD: It's an image that he got from a lifesaving manual of two guys underwater – a person sort of near the surface, and another on the bottom. And you just know they're floating in the landscape – you can't really tell, but they're underwater. And it has one of his really angry texts printed in aqua over it, so it has an aquatic feeling to it, and it's a diptych. That's one panel. And then the other panel is a map of the US in red and white target, concentric circles, on a black background, and then, printed over that, in aqua, is stock quotes. David was really easy to work with, on that level, in that, he said, oh, I want this and I want that, and just make it happen. So, I got the stock quotes from a Wall Street Journal, and the heading of each alphabetical section, they repeat the letter three times, so it's AAA, BBB, CCC, and I said, "Is this okay with you? I picked the one where it said KKK." And I said, "Is that a little too literal for you?" And he said, "No, no, no, I kind of like that." But they're really nice prints. And David had written this piece about, why is it that when people die, their friends don't put their body in the car, drive it to DC at 800 miles an hour, bust through the gates of the White House and throw the body out on the White House steps. And that's not verbatim, but that's pretty close. And so, he was the person that, when he died there was a big – there were several political funerals, but he was one of them – where people marched in memory of him, through the streets of the East Village, and it ended up over by Cooper Union with projecting images of his art, on a wall. And then all of the posters – some of which were not used proofs from this print that we did – were burned on the street. And burning foam-core isn't something you want to stand in the way of the smoke, exactly.

The first political funeral was Mark Fisher, who was a member of Wave III. And

you've interviewed Russell Pritchard – Russell and Mark went to Rome. Mark knew he was in bad shape – a really nice guy. He worked for an architectural firm. He had worked on the team with Arata Isozaki, who is doing the re-design of the Brooklyn Museum. They went to Rome, and Mark died on the airplane on the way back. So, he and Russell are on the airplane, flying back from Rome. Mark's refused medication in Rome. They couldn't get a doctor. Let's just go home. Let's not go early. Let's not do whatever. Mark starts doing weird things on the way back, and dies in the seat next to Russell, on the airplane. And the stewardess and the crew come and they go, yes, in fact, he's dead. They got met by an ambulance at the tarmac at Kennedy. I cannot think of a more horrendous thing to have happened than someone you've just spent a week on vacation with, dying, next to you on an airplane.

That was right before one of the elections. I guess it was the Bush/Clinton
02:05:00 election. We ended up marching from a memorial down at Washington Square, up to Republican headquarters, which was up near the Algonquin Hotel, sort of. So, we went up Sixth Avenue to 45th, 43rd Street. We went up to Republican headquarters with Mark's body in an open casket, in the rain, against traffic, or with traffic, whatever. It was just hellacious, but it something we had to do. I don't think – because all the umbrellas were over the body – people actually knew that there was a dead body there on the street. It was just amazing. If that had been me, I would have wanted the same thing to have happened.

There were several other ones. Jon Greenberg got walked around the East Village in an open coffin. And Tim Bailey was the one that I did not go to and I think I'm glad

because I think I'd have been killed by the cops at that. They took Tim Bailey down to DC, to march him from the Capitol to the White House – dead body, open coffin. The Feds got word of what was going on, plus, the ACT UP folks were on QPT – Queer People's Time – and the body got there before everybody was ready, and so, why are all these people hanging around in the parking lot? Who are these people with T-shirts and signs? The Feds got hip to it. There was this huge shoving and pushing match. People were arrested. Tim Bailey's brother got arrested. I'd have been under the jail, I know, if I'd been there. The Feds ended up not letting them take Tim Bailey's body out of the van and followed them to Baltimore, to make sure they didn't come back and pull it again. It's just amazing. They did not want to be embarrassed. Someone got word of what was going on. The press release got picked up by somebody. Whatever the deal was – that was the most outrageous police stuff I've ever seen, except we went over to Brooklyn one time to – there was some high police official, that we were going to go to his house and picket, and the bus left the Center and three police cars followed us all the way to Brooklyn, and there was a two-block perimeter around this guy's house with spotlights and barricades and police dogs that the cops would not let us go within two blocks of this guy's house. Those are the most outrageous police things I've ever seen.

SS: Now, with Mark Fisher – so, you got to the Republican National Headquarters – what happened with the body?

RD: It was – words were spoken there – bullhorns, statements read, Mark Fisher's statement read. And then, the body was given to Mark's relatives, who were quite happy to let us do what we had done, and he was, I believe, cremated. I think his

ashes are with his relatives, wherever his home was.

SS: So, these guys who had these political funerals – they discussed with other people beforehand that that's what they wanted.

RD: Yeah, it had been talked about. It had been theorized. We ended up having two political funerals at the actual White House. The first one – there's a lot of videotape that James [Wentzy] has in one of his videos – where we were going to go to the front of the White House. We marched from near the Capitol to the rear of the mall side of the White House, because we had been told, during that march, that there were too many cops up at the front and they were going to block us from getting to the gate. So, we went to the backside of the White House, and even at that, cops rode horses into the crowd. It's lucky nobody was killed. The cops were really pissed off. They had orders not to let us get near the fence, and we did it anyhow.

SS: Let me ask you this – in a lot of the things that you're telling me, there's examples of the police perceiving ACT UP as being dangerous or violent – where did that perception come from?

02:10:00 RD: I think our reputation was that we – first of all, cops are going to be violent with you, if they perceive you as any kind of threat – whether that's true or not. And the cops had this idea that we were radical, violent people. And that's not exactly true. We were persistent and we would do what we'd want, but nobody in ACT UP was going to throw a bomb or throw a punch. But they didn't know that. I think they believed the rhetoric. It's like with the radicals in the sixties – they believed the rhetoric.

SS: But did anyone in ACT UP ever initiate an act of violence?

RD: We were charged with it, but to my knowledge, no.

SS: So, how do you explain – just going into it in a little more depth – if ACT UP had never been violent, what were the police threatened by?

RD: Well, in fact, there were great pains taken to declare non-violence. There was a non-violence list, of, you know, people were expected to adhere to – It was voted on that, that ACT UP would be a non-violent group. But, we just had this reputation of being fearless and in your face, and I think our reputation just preceded us. No one was doing this kind of activism at that point. There was not the – compared to what we were doing, the people in Seattle for the World Trade Organization stuff were Attila the Hun. Those people were going out and causing violence and lighting fires and breaking windows and stuff like that. That wasn't what we did, but we had the perception that, because we were challenging authority, that we were capable of anything. And, on a certain level, we were capable of anything. We just weren't shooting or throwing punches or anything like that.

SS: Let me ask you two final questions. Looking back, what do you think was ACT UP's greatest failure, in a sense? What was the most important thing that ACT UP failed to do?

RD: End the AIDS crisis, obviously. When you come down to, what was the purpose of ACT UP? You'd get a different answer, depending on who you talked to, but the purpose of ACT UP, was to end the AIDS crisis. And that didn't happen. It still hasn't happened.

SS: Why not?

RD: Well, because the virus is pretty darn sneaky.

SS: We just need to wait a minute because we're losing James [Wentzy].

RD: It's not something you can take an aspirin and call me in the morning.

SS: Right but ACT UP did sort of stop at a certain point – even though, you're still in ACT UP.

RD: Okay. People died, people burned out, people had disagreements and decided that they couldn't work with the group anymore, or people got jobs doing what they were doing for free in ACT UP and suddenly were at odds with what ACT UP was about. Or, they didn't get a date, so why come back? I mean, there were a number of reasons. But I think ACT UP's failure – if you want to go to the most basic thing, is not ending the AIDS crisis.

SS: Okay. And what do you consider to be ACT UP's greatest success?

RD: Well, ACT UP's greatest success is putting the AIDS crisis on the map. People were not talking about this stuff. People were not. And, in a way, their greatest accomplishment – big deal – it's an incomplete job, because the job was bigger than any of us imagined it could possibly be. This wasn't something that – oh, okay, we'll throw a few more billion dollars. We'll throw five more scientists. We'll do this, we'll do that, and it will all be over. It didn't happen like that. And people get tired of this stuff. There are people that have gone off and gotten jobs, either in public health or in policy or whatever they were doing in ACT UP, that they weren't getting paid for, they figured out
02:15:00 how to get paid for it. Or they died. Or they lost interest and decided to go off and have a real career. Or they decided to go off and have a real life, or whatever.

SS: What do you feel is, personally, your biggest contribution, or the thing you're most proud of, that you achieved in ACT UP?

RD: Well, I'd like to say that I think my graphics are pretty good and did a good job of communicating the information. But, you know, in a way, my greatest achievement in ACT UP is myself, because I'm a real different person. A person's job is creating their self.

SS: Can you explain more specifically what you mean? What were you able to give yourself, from going through this process?

RD: I don't know that I can explain it quite that way. The Chinese always say, may you live in interesting times, and that's not a nice thing to say, because interesting to them is not necessarily – well, it's a curse, it's not a blessing. I've lived in some pretty interesting times, and I think a whole bunch of us have. I don't know why I'm getting weird all of a sudden. I did this for me, in a certain way and – Is that too abstract?

SS: No, but you're having a lot of feelings, and I'm not exactly understanding –

RD: I'm not quite either, because I don't like to talk about feelings a lot, or certain kind of feelings.

SS: You've made an incredible commitment. You've committed your life to this process, and you've contributed an enormous amount. You've created images that are emblematic for this movement. Of all of that, you're saying that the thing you're most proud of is the whole of it?

RD: Yeah, because that's only part of it. You know, it's been learning, it's

been sharing, it's been meeting people, it's been doing work, it's been doing good work, it's been all of that stuff. And that wouldn't have happened if I'd sat on my ass. And I don't know that I did the best, but I tried. There are other people that I think, maybe had a better impact, a more lasting impact, but I think I gave it my best.

SS: Okay, thank you, Richard.

RD: Warm milk for everybody. I'm not quite sure where all of that came from.

SS: We talked about a lot of things that are not abstract. Thank you.